

A
L E T T E R
T O

EDWARD JEFFRIES, Esq.
CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE,
APPOINTED BY THE
DEPUTIES OF THE THREE DENOMINATIONS

OF
PROTESTANT DISSENTERS,

TO CARRY INTO EFFECT
A RESOLUTION OF THE SAID DEPUTIES,

TO APPLY TO
P A R L I A M E N T,
FOR A REPEAL OF THE
CORPORATION AND TEST ACTS,
SO FAR AS THEY CONCERN

PROTESTANT DISSENTERS.

OCCASIONED BY
A RESOLUTION OF THE SAID COMMITTEE,

“That it be recommended to the DISSENTING CONGREGATIONS throughout
ENGLAND and WALES, to signify their Approbation of the intended Application to
PARLIAMENT, by Letters directed to the CHAIRMAN of this COMMITTEE.”

BY THE REV. DAVID BRADBERRY.

Et prius quam incipias, consulto, et ubi consulueris, mature facto opus est.

QUIN. CUR.

L O N D O N :

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1789.

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L E T T E R, &c.

S I R,

YOUR Letter containing the RESOLUTIONS of the *Deputies* and *Committee*, concerning their intended application to Parliament, for the repeal of the *Test* and *Corporation Acts*, has been laid before the Congregation of Protestant Dissenters to which I minister ; and, I hereby signify to you, Sir, as Chairman of the Committee, their approbation, and my own, of such intended application.

We should feel ourselves very unworthy of the privileges we enjoy, and of those rights we claim as our unalienable inheritance, by the laws of *Heaven*—and human society, if, while we are able, and willing, to give every reasonable security to the powers

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that be, for our conduct, as members of civil society, we should basely resign those rights to the encroachments of arbitrary power ; or barter the most sacred deposit of conscience, religion, and morality, to obtain—what is not worth possessing, upon terms injurious to the honour of God, to purity of conscience, and integrity of heart !

We conceive that the ALMIGHTY CREATOR, and consequent SOVEREIGN of the world, has endowed his intelligent creatures, as the subjects of his universal empire, with a liberty and independency, originally subject to the controul of no being but himself, either in matters moral or civil, religious or political. And notwithstanding HE has, in the course of his wise and holy providence, permitted his intelligent subjects upon earth, to exercise, freely, their rational powers, in devising, compounding, and constituting a system of social union, cemented by mutual benefits and obligations.—A relative order and political subordination—A concatenation of authorities and privileges.—Notwithstanding this permissive dispensation of Divine Providence has been sanctioned by the word of Revelation, and has generally, if not universally, obtained throughout the world ; yet it ought to be remembered, that two considerations always accompany this providential procedure of the great LORD of all.

First.

First. He absolutely reserves to HIMSELF, the supreme authority, and right of government, where any defect, or misrule, shall render it necessary for HIM to interpose his wisdom to direct, or his power to controul.

Secondly. It is always to be understood, that, no one of his subjects, either has resigned, or can resign, any part of the liberty or independency he is endowed with, as a rational creature, to another; or to a community with whom he is connected, but for a valuable consideration; or for something equally beneficial: Mutual, and not individual emolument, aggrandizement, privilege, benefit, or advantage, being intended by all civil association.

And it ought to be remembered also, that, this dispensation of Divine Providence, in no respect, exceeds the limits of things merely civil and political; nor in the smallest degree, suffers infringement upon his moral government, or his superintendancy, and absolute authority, over the consciences of his intelligent subjects. In the empire of conscience, no allegiance is due to creatures. JEHOVAH is insulted, when such allegiance is either claimed, or granted!

As a Brit^{ish}in, I glory in those laws of my country, which are expressly provided and made for the purpose of securing the rights and liberties of the people. Amongst which, I would include

clude such, as support the authority, but define and limit, the prerogative of the civil magistrate.

As a Christian, I hold, (as I ought) dearer than life itself, those laws, which, (while they bind me indeed to the foot-stool of JEHOVAH—a place and posture which not only admits, but implies, the liberty—the dignity—the felicity of a rational creature) absolve me from the yoke of every pretender! Laws, which stamp upon the haughty claims of usurpers, oppressors, persecutors, or spiritual tyrants, the indelible marks of infamy which they deserve.

When pride, and thirst of power, dictate a claim of spiritual lordship over my conscience—*Let integrity preserve me!* To admit the claim as just, would make me a partaker of the evil deed.—The tyrant and the slave, who are such by consent, may justly divide the product of their pains between them!—But if any will attempt to juggle JEHOVAH out of his rightful dominion in the conscience, he is welcome to his hardly earned honour of grasping the iron rod—The golden sceptre can never be his—It would be as inconsistent and heterogenial, as Nebuchadnezzar's image!—He is welcome, to all the natural, and necessary consequences of *striving with his* MAKER!—I will be no man's companion in such a contest.—On the contrary, I will contribute my mite of abilities towards the demolition of mere human authority in the empire of GOD!

The case of the conscientious Dissenters, now in contemplation, is peculiarly hard! For they are under the painful necessity of dividing asunder, what God has joined together, *i. e.* the apostolick injunction—FEAR GOD—HONOUR THE KING.—An injunction, which, (where one branch of it does not thwart the other) Protestant Dissenters have always regarded, with as much devotion and loyalty, as any denomination of their fellow Christians, and fellow subjects, within his Majesty's dominions! Now, if by honouring the KING, is to be understood, not only maintaining a reverence for his person and government, but rendering him faithful services in civil or military concerns, according to our abilities and capacities, as men and members of the community; then, it is evident, that a conscientious Dissenter, is put under a legal incapacity for such service, by those laws of which we complain. He has hands, which he would chearfully employ in the service of his KING and his country, but they are tied; and he is compelled to become a dead weight upon the community. He can neither honour the KING, nor benefit his country by his services, in a civil or military capacity; since, a qualification for that very service is required, which, to him, is incompatible with the fear of GOD, or a good conscience.

On the other hand—if his rank—his talents—or his inclination, calls him into the service of his *sovereign*, and his country—here is a *sacrifice* to be made at the very out-set—a great *sacrifice*—the

rights of conscience, and reverence of the sacred authority of GOD ! A *sacrifice*—however grateful to the base and narrow mind of superstition, usurping the throne, *and sitting in the temple of God*—yet, a *sacrifice*, with which GOD himself—is not—cannot be *well pleased* ! But, if he is tempted to strain a point with his conscience, and trifle with sacred things—is the community gainer by the consequence ? “ Is that man the more faithful servant to his earthly *sovereign* for being unfaithful to his heavenly “ ONE ? ”

Again—Why should Protestant Dissenters be not only incapacitated for the service, but also debarred the honours of civil rank ? Is it a crime, then, in this enlightened country, to be conscientious ?—Is integrity the game that must be hunted down, and chased from the dwellings of all, except the halt, the lame, and the blind ?—Can none but persecutors and hypocrites, be entrusted with the confidence of their country ? Protestant Dissenters are, in every point of view, as valuable subjects, and members of the community, and can give as ample security for their allegiance to government, as any description of persons within his Majesty's empire. What wisdom—what policy, then appears in forming, and maintaining laws, oppressive to a large part of the community, and productive only of jealousies, disaffection, and consequent weakness in the state ? Are not mankind sufficiently prone to evil—to make inroads upon the sacred rights of conscience, and tread

tread with unhallowed feet upon the limits of religious obligation and morality—but we must aid the depravity of human nature, and *frame mischief by a law*? *Where no law is, there is no transgression*—But, here are laws, whose evident tendency is to multiply crimes! For, surely it is a crime for a member of the civil community, either to withhold his service from his country, or dishonour his God, and violate his conscience in the performance of it!

What is the implied language of those laws? Conform and be a criminal in the court of conscience, and in the sight of God; or, non-conform, and be a criminal in the eye of the law, and the estimation of your country; and be punished accordingly, with a declared incapacity to hold, or enjoy certain places of trust, honour, and emolument, in the community!—Methinks the punishment exceeds the offence!

It will perhaps be alledged, that Protestant Dissenters are at full liberty to accept or refuse the test.—But if a Protestant Dissenter is not criminal in refusing the test as a qualification for office in the state—why then is he to be punished without an imputation of criminality? And why should those laws be continued, which create only an imaginary crime, for the sake of inflicting a real punishment?

Either

Either I have done right in following, (as I conceive) the dictates of reason and conscience in my non-conformity—or I have done wrong—If right, why restrain my non-conformity, by inflicting civil incapacities?—Punish me for well-doing?—If wrong—who is mine accuser, and prosecutor?—Is the injury done to GOD? Then, it is fit, he should be both the judge and avenger!—If done against my country, or against my fellow subjects—let them bear witness of the wrong that I have done!—*Whose ox have I taken?—Whose ass have I taken?—Or whom have I defrauded?—Whom have I oppressed,* by my non-conformity? *Or of whose hand have I received any bribe to blind mine eyes therewith?* Non-conformity is by no means the channel of bribery—We are not in the way of large pecuniary acquisitions, sinecures, presentations, pluralities, and preferments! These are not the things that we want—We resign all pretensions to these blinders of the eyes, as our own act and deed, for the small consideration of non-conformity, supported among ourselves, though at an enormous expence! and only require, that we may not be punished with civil incapacities for such an offence!

I am aware that upon the present ground, we contend against odds; yet the odds is only in number, not in weight of metal! We contend, perhaps, against the prejudices of the multitude; and, perhaps, we contend against the fears and hopes of interested individuals;

individuals ;—and interested individuals often *fear*, where no fear is, and their hope is, not unfrequently, a consequence drawn without premises.

The diminution or encrease of Protestant Dissenters, can no way essentially affect our conforming brethren; while, for our support, we are mutually independent on each other; and having a common cause, wherein we all agree, why not mutually forbear in those things wherein we disagree, without ^efitting up the OLD IDOL of uniformity? AN IDOL which has destroyed more of the human species, than the wars of a CÆSAR or an ALEXANDER! May not the Dissenters assist in the defence of the citadel, without being exposed to the fire of the out-works? And are they the less worthy of support and encouragement from within, for being the more exposed to the assaults of the common enemy without? May not the soldier, who voluntarily resigns the luxury of good quarters, and exposes himself on the field of action, be intrusted with a single biscuit in his knapsack? But I will not speak figuratively—I will not put it in the option of any to misrepresent my meaning. What crime has he committed, who has stood in the ranks of his fellow-citizens and countrymen, and rushed upon the pointed horrors of *almost* inevitable death! Escaped only to feel the keener point of his country's ingratitude!—What crime, I say, has he committed, that must

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doom him to a subaltern station, without hope of reward, unless upon the hard condition, of resigning his conscience, and dishonouring his God?—And shall the brave Briton, who has long ploughed the waves, and often hurled the thunders of war upon the enemies of his country, pine and groan under the same ungrateful alternative.—*Tell it not in Gath!—Publish it not in the streets of Askelon!* Must we presume that there are none of this description in his Majesty's service—that scruples of conscience are not to be expected in military men.—The supposition is unjust! And were it otherwise—a mighty sum of the promises and pretensions of those, who can smile at oppression, sneer at conscience, and trifle with sacred things, *would not countervail the King's damage!*

All monopolies are encroachments upon the common rights of men.—The confidence—the honours of the state, are common rights, of which no member of the civil community can be ~~denied~~, but by an act of forfeiture. For the enjoyment of which, no such member can be incapacitated by his fellow-citizens, without an act of criminality alledged, and legally proved. But, by what act, have Protestant Dissenters forfeited this common right?—For what crime are they incapacitated to share the confidence, and enjoy the honours of the state?—For what high offence, do they suffer this degradation from the

rights of fellow-citizens ; and are not permitted to deserve the confidence, and earn the honours of the state ?—Is non-conformity the crime ?—And is it wise in the legislature, by one act to tolerate a crime, and by another to punish it ?

But, perhaps, we shall be told, that non-conformity is no crime, when *under certain restrictions* ; and, *under certain restrictions*, is an object of protection, and not of punishment !—Yet, if non-conformity itself be no crime, why put restrictions upon it ? And why oblige the non-conformist to run under *certain restrictions*, to escape criminality and punishment ?

Perhaps, we shall be told, that the security of the state, and of the established church, requires that restrictions should be laid upon Protestant Dissenters.—But where, and what is the injury that can arise from the repeal of the *Test and Corporation Acts*, to church or state ? The most fertile imagination cannot conceive of any possible injury to either, that can arise from such repeal.—For, surely, a greater caution, and better security, need not be required from persons admitted into offices, than is required from the Members of both Houses of Parliament, who are not obliged to receive the sacrament to qualify them to sit in either House—unless it be presumed, that the smallest office in a corporation is
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of more consequence to the state, than a seat, and a share of legislative authority, in either House of Parliament !

A proper attention to the times and circumstances in which those laws obtained, will discover, that they were either not intended to operate against Protestant Dissenters,* or took place at a period,† when such party violence and heat prevailed, as could scarcely be expected to produce measures, fit to be adopted, and pursued in better times.

The Protestant Dissenters of Ireland having obtained an act of Parliament to restore them to their civil rights ; and nine years having elapsed, without the smallest injury having arisen to the church, or state, from that measure, would it not be a flagrant act of injustice, to mark the Protestant Dissenters of this country, as of all, the most unworthy to enjoy their common rights, as
British

* The Test Act—Intituled, An Act for preventing dangers which may happen from *Popish Recusants*.—N. B. The Dissenters promoted this Act, resigning (for a time) their own rights, to oppose the common enemy.

† The first year after the Restoration.—In those times, when a spirit of intolerance prevailed, and severe measures were pursued, the Dissenters were reputed, and treated as persons ill-affected and dangerous to Government.—Lord Mansfield's Speech in the House of Lords, February 4, 1767.—In the Appendix to Dr. Furneaux's Letters to Sir William Blackstone, page 259.

British subjects and Protestants? The Episcopalian in Scotland, (who is the Dissenter in that country) meets with no such restrictions or incapacities; why then should the North Briton, when he crosses the Tweed, be obliged to surrender and deposit, either his civil or religious rights? He may find this a fertile country—But, perhaps, will, sighing, say—What pity, that the *Land of Goshen* has its *task-masters*!

In respect to the established church, what injury can befall it, by the repeal of the acts in question? Those are not the acts by which it was established—Nor can its doctrines, discipline, or privileges, be at all affected by the repeal of them.—On the other hand, the ministers of the established church would, by the repeal of those acts, be relieved from a situation, the most absurd and ridiculous, as well as the most unconscionable and vexatious, that can be conceived!—That of admitting to the sacrament, as a qualification for office, the most notorious blasphemers!—Slanders of the Christian religion!—Adulterers, and scandalous livers! (However contrary to the notices in the service of that church, concerning the celebration of the communion.—However contrary to the dictates of conscience—Nay, however contrary to the common sense of all Christian reformed churches, none of which ever applied the sacrament as a qualification for civil employments or advantages) or of being liable to a prosecution for refusing so to do.

In short, it is evidently the interest of the established church, and must redound much to its honour, that the acts in question should be repealed; and its friends and advocates would do wisely in promoting the repeal, lest any should suppose, that the established hierarchy of England is founded in persecuting principles, and can stand no longer than non-conformists are restrained, discouraged, and oppressed by human laws! A supposition, which, however extravagantly absurd, can no way be so effectually refuted, as by their cheerful consent to repeal those acts. And why may we not find another Bishop Burnet,* to plead our cause, by alledging, that as the Test Act was obtained, in some measure, by the concurrence of the Dissenters, it would be hard to turn it against them. Besides, those acts bear hard, very hard, upon such members of the established church, (and it may be presumed there are not a few such) who can by no means think it right, to take the sacrament in any church, for the purpose of qualifying for civil, or military offices.

It cannot be improper for Dissenters to entertain the most sanguine expectations, from the wisdom and moderation of Parliament—especially, in times so happily freed from the fumes of party zeal, and the predominance of systematick persecution and slavery.—

* In his Speech in the House of Lords on the subject of the occasional Bill,
1703.

slavery.—When a cool and deliberate attention may be paid to the claims of all his Majesty's subjects ; and a proper construction may be put upon the long sufferings of Protestant Dissenters, under restraining, and incapacitating laws.—Laws, either not primarily intended to be applied to them—Or ultimately demonstrated to be neither founded in justice nor policy, as so applied !

His Majesty's ministers will, undoubtedly, upon this occasion recollect, that—*In the multitude of people is the King's honour*—That he is the common father of his people—And that, while, with paternal fondness, he dandles one son upon his right knee—he will condescend to embrace and sustain another who, without envying his brother, leans with filial confidence upon the left !—May his reign be long and glorious—not only over, but in the hearts of his whole family—as a truly religious, free, loyal, and happy people !

It is far, very far from my intention, that any thing indecent, or disrespectful, should escape my pen upon this occasion ; meaning only to express my own ideas in my own way, and leaving others to do the same. Sorry should I be, to give the smallest just cause of offence, to any man upon earth—except the Man of Sin ! He, indeed, will be offended—From Him, I expect no quarter !—I bow the knee of gratitude to the Providence of

GOD, that our appeal lies not at *his* bar—But at the bar of a British and Protestant Senate, where we may stand with a manly firmness—as conscious that we are not craving a *boon*—but demanding a *right*! Here, a multitude of arguments, must be impertinent—since the first that occurs, is absolutely unanswerable, and conclusive. If it were not so, arguments cannot be wanting, till all distinction between religion and superstition, liberty and slavery, shall be utterly abolished! and if ever that should be the case in this country, nothing will be left worth contending for. I wish to forbear disposing of the question in every point of light which readily occurs, lest its face should be distorted, with such lines of absurdity and inconsistency, as would scarcely comport with the gravity and importance of the subject. I rejoice, that there are so many, and such able advocates for a cause, so truly interesting to liberty and morality. Their arguments will stand firm, like Teneriff or Atlas, when those of their opponents shall evaporate into smoke, and be utterly lost, together with the cause of oppression and persecution, which they attempt to support!

A steady perseverance in the line of truth and honour, cannot fail to insure, finally, the desired success. To suppose that the people at large will always approve the spirit of oppression—or that the legislature of this country will continue a species of persecution, and deny to any of his Majesty's good subjects, the
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things which are *just and equal*—would be to libel the common sense of the nation !

The almost judicial blindness, which, (together with *that Egyptian darkness that may be felt, i. e.* the corruptions of Christianity) has overspread most of the European nations—(sadly demonstrable, in the mutual ignorance and folly, with which some have claimed, and others resigned, their civil and religious liberties) I trust, is approximating towards the return of light, when the intolerable, but impotent shackles of spiritual tyranny, will be shook off the minds of men, and with indignant detestation, thrown back into the cells of superstition from whence they came !

I am, Sir,

With becoming respect,

Your most obedient humble servant,

MANCHESTER,
August 25, 1788.

DAVID BRADBERRY.